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SUBJECT: ZIMBABWE'S LESS VIOLENT ELECTION

REF: A. HARARE 384
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Classified By: Ambassador Christopher W. Dell under Section 1.4 b/d

Summary

[¶1.](#) (C) This is the latest in a series of cables post is doing assessing the legal setting, pre-electoral environment, and conduct of Zimbabwe's March 31 parliamentary elections. According to everyone involved in the election, violence is much reduced from the 2000 parliamentary and 2002 presidential elections. We are seeing reports of continuing intimidation and more overt violence may yet escalate in the campaign's remaining weeks. However, both sides have largely adhered to their high-level public declarations of the need for tolerance and non-violence. There are a variety of factors that explain this welcome development, including: regional and international pressure, ZANU-PF infighting and overconfidence, and the opposition MDC's late entry into the race. The relative lack of violence may provide a foundation for renewed intra-party talks following the election. End Summary.

Reduced Violence

[¶2.](#) (C) President Mugabe and other senior GOZ officials have repeatedly emphasized in public that the March 31 parliamentary elections must be non-violent. At the end of January, Vice President Joyce Mujuru led a well-publicized national prayer service for peaceful elections, and most ruling party candidates have consistently echoed the leadership's rhetoric on violence at campaign rallies and media interviews. The opposition MDC has made similar appeals for a non-violent election and even the police have played a constructive role. Police Commissioner Augustine Chihuri and other senior officials have publicly and privately reiterated a "zero tolerance" policy toward political violence.

[¶3.](#) (C) That said, contested Zimbabwean elections have always engendered violence, leading observers to predict that 2004 would follow the familiar pattern of a rise in campaign-related violence beginning around October. However, as the elections on March 31 draw near, the anticipated spike in violence has not materialized. To be sure, the run-up to elections has not been without incident. Still, MDC officials and NGOs such as The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum agree that violence is much lower now than during the 2000 and 2002 elections (ref A). MDC and NGO contacts advise, for instance, that "pungwes" -- days-long political indoctrination sessions to which locals were force-marched and sometimes beaten during past elections -- have vanished from the scene, even in the most remote rural areas.

[¶4.](#) (C) In addition, in many rural and urban areas, the militia activity of past elections has reportedly noticeably diminished. One resident from Chitungwiza, a high-density district on the outskirts of Harare, advised that ruling party cadres are still coming door-to-door, hectoring locals to attend ZANU-PF neighborhood rallies, but unlike in the past locals felt free to ignore them without fear of retribution. Although the public display of party loyalties still triggers occasional inter-party violence and harassment, MDC and NGO contacts and diplomatic observers around the country report that MDC posters and t-shirts are evident practically nation-wide, again, in marked departure from 2000 and 2002.

Intimidation May be Rising

[¶5.](#) (C) During the past two weeks, however, we have received reports of increasing intimidation in some parts of the country, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas of Mashonaland, the center of the country and ZANU-PF's heartland.⁸ An American legal permanent resident Zimbabwean visiting his family home in Mashonaland Central,

for example, reported that ruling party elements had been conducting door-to-door campaigns, telling residents that translucent ballot boxes would enable local authorities to see how people voted, and that the "blackboots" would later visit those who had voted for the MDC. In meetings on March 17 with Embassy staff, MDC candidates in Mashonaland East cited similar examples of intimidation. ZANU-PF supporters had been seen recording the names of those attending MDC rallies, and voters had been instructed to go to the polls with their village chief or headman, who would insure votes went to the ruling party.

16. (C) With less than two weeks to go before the election, however, many here still fear that the more relaxed environment represents a ruling party experiment, and that ZANU-PF may yet unleash violence in areas where its traditional hold is most tenuous. We have heard reports, for instance, that some ZANU-PF candidates and local organizers recognize that the party cannot win without violence in their constituency, and have been pressing the leadership for more latitude on intimidation. In that regard, the increasing reports of escalating intimidation may signal the ruling party's return to traditional tactics. Even without further intimidation and violence, residual fear (the legacy of violence in past elections) remains a very real factor.

Causes of Reduced Violence

17. (C) Several factors help explain the change in Mugabe and ZANU-PF's tactics during these elections. Many observers cite the confidence (some would say overconfidence) of the regime, which seems to believe it can score a victory without overt violence. By all accounts, years of repressive tactics have the electorate cowed. To boot, the opposition MDC observed a conditional boycott of the elections in late 2004 and early 2005, bolstering the ruling party's sense of strength. ZANU-PF's preoccupation with its own internal politics may also have played a role in reducing violence. The Tsholotsho affair, an espionage scandal, and divisive primaries distracted the party from pursuing its usual heavy-handed tactics, and took some of the focus off the opposition.

18. (C) The ruling party's new non-violent stance is also central to Mugabe's attempt to regain legitimacy. The GOZ can be expected to showcase the reduction in violence to make its case that it has adhered to the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) election principles, even as its performance has fallen short in many key areas. The knowledge that he is under close scrutiny by the international community, especially the U.S. and U.K., certainly contributed to Mugabe's decision to ratchet down the violence. He seems to have done so as well as part of a more or less explicit understanding with his SADC neighbors that this was key to winning their endorsement of the process and outcome. According to unconfirmed rumors, President Mbeki told Mugabe that SADC would bless the elections, regardless of outcome, as long as they were non-violent and Mugabe will, in turn, point to SADC's approval as proof of his mandate.

19. (C) Finally, another factor may have been the assessment of some in the ruling party that its intimidating tactics, rather than ensuring victory, may have precipitated a voter backlash in 2000. Several ZANU-PF MPs have confirmed this to us, and we have heard numerous reports of MPs, including Speaker Emmerson Mnangagwa, who lost his seat in 2000, instructing their local organizers not to use intimidation to elicit votes. Whatever the causes, the diminution in violence this year appears to have given the MDC an opening. Senior MDC leaders tell us that even a last minute spike in violence will now be too late to overcome the connection the party has made with the electorate. They continue to predict a good electoral showing for their party, which in turn could spur resumed intra-party talks following the election to resolve Zimbabwe's debilitating political crisis.

110. (C) COMMENT. SADC will almost certainly justify its expected endorsement of the elections largely based on a comparison to the 2000 and 2002 elections, citing in particular the much lower levels of violence as a sign of a positive trend. In reply, we will want to emphasize that the outcome should be judged against the SADC principles and guidelines (as well as the recommendations of the 2002 South African national observer team) and not by comparison to other, even more deeply flawed previous elections. END COMMENT.
Dell